

By LEE PROCIDA, Staff Writer | Posted: Wednesday, May 19, 2010

U.S. Reps. Frank LoBiondo and John Adler on Tuesday praised the U.S. Department of Agriculture's recent announcement that a \$161.4 million food purchase for nutritional programs would include \$18 million for cranberry products, potentially helping local growers.

"South Jersey's cranberry crop is a key economic component of our region's agricultural industry and yields tens of millions of dollars in revenue annually," LoBiondo, R-2nd, said in a statement. "I am pleased by the USDA's decision, which will benefit our farmers and federal nutrition programs."

The USDA made the announcement at the end of April. The local legislators said they had requested a month before that the department buy surplus fruit to help stabilize prices, as farmers said demand plunged during the recession.

"Cranberries are a luxury item," said Washington Township, Burlington County-based grower Steve Lee IV, who said the purchase should definitely help the industry as a whole.

The legislators said in their statement that the worldwide economic decline led to a massive surplus, with cranberry inventories expected to double by next year.

"This decision will benefit South Jersey's economy and provide a boost for local farmers," said Adler, D-3rd. "I am pleased that Washington listened and decided to purchase nutritious cranberries from our local farmers."

Lee said it was not immediately clear how the purchase would benefit southern New Jersey farmers, most of whom are members of the Ocean Spray cooperative.

USDA and Ocean Spray spokespeople could not immediately provide details on where the products would come from and what benefit that would have for individual growers in the region.

The USDA's Agricultural Marketing Service purchases food products each year to support a variety of programs, such as the National School Lunch Program, the School Breakfast Program, the Summer Food Service Program and the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations.

Besides cranberries, the department is buying as much as \$40 million of beef products, \$32 million of fresh and processed apple products, \$18 million of potatoes and \$7 million of strawberries.